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ABSTRACT

In a fifty-minute period, a class of speech students can be given an object lesson in listening skills. Materials needed are an article that can be read aloud in ten minutes, enough copies for class distribution, and a carefully composed list of ten to twelve questions. When the students arrive for the first class, the teacher reads the article aloud in a straightforward manner but without any emphasis on delivery. The students' relief at the end of the reading will turn to protest when they are asked to write answers to specific questions about the article. In going over the answers, the students usually find that they have only two or three correct, and offer explanations as to why they were not listening. By asking if the students' poor showing was all their fault, the teacher opens up a discussion of what the teacher/speaker should have done, such as use more vocal expression, write key ideas on the board, or expand on complex issues. The teacher then supplies the class with copies of the article, and the class, feeling satisfied that the teacher shares the blame, believes that the lesson is over. But the discussion continues so that students can begin to see that they must learn to engage in critical or social listening and not place all of the burden of communication on the speaker. Positive feedback on this exercise encourages the students, and helps move listening to the conscious level. (MKA)

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But I Just Said That. Weren't You Listening?

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Linda A. Desjardins is a lecturer at Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill, Massachusetts. This essay and lesson description have been written in the interest of sharing a listening exercise which has been successful in her classroom.

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But I just said that. Weren't you listening?

An Object Lesson to Encourage Active Listening.

Preparation Required

The object lesson being described here fits tightly into a fifty-minute period. It feels more comfortable in a seventy-five minute session. The materials needed are an article or essay, preferably on the importance of good listening skills, which can be read aloud in about ten minutes, enough copies of the article for class distribution, and a carefully composed list of ten to twelve questions. The students should arrive at class prepared to discuss the textbook's chapter on listening.

Rationale

The syllabus I distribute on day one of my speech class contains this pompous-sounding explanation of my theories on speaking and listening:

> When people think of public speaking, the image of one person speaking to or at an audience is conjured up. While this association is valid, it represents only a small part of the communication process. If the speaker's goal is to speak to rather than at, or communicate effectively with the audience, many considerations must be made before the speaking process even begins. A desire to speak, a limited topic, a clear purpose, an assessment of audience and their expectations and an awareness of the limitations of time and location must all be taken into account before a

> speaker begins. And still, we have only examined half of the communication process. The other half, listening, is just as important to effective communication. In order to listen well, listeners, too, must actively examine their habits. Listening goals which align with listening purposes must be set before people can maximize their listening ability. But to separate speaking and listening into two halves, as we have done here, does not do the communication process justice either. A speaker's delivery or the time or location of the speech may affect the audience's ability to listen; similarly, the audience's listening behavior is likely to affect the speaker. Speaking and listening are interdependent, and their roles overlap.

Although the students seem to agree on a philosophical level with what I've said, their practice points only to a speaker orientation. Their listening consciousness needs raising. Consequently, the role listening has in the communication process keeps getting addressed in the next several classes. Whenever the role of a speaker in a communication setting is discussed, the impact of the receiver's feedback is given equal attention. Speakers' goals are shown to take shape only after the audience, the listeners, have been considered.

Although speaking and listening are always discussed in tandem, and despite my emphasis on the need for strong listening skills, the students seem to concentrate on what they consider to

be the crucial part of the process -- the speaking. Only in the speaking role do they seem to feel they are creating an impact because here they are actively involved and on display. This attitude that only the speaking counts reflects the subordinate attitude toward listening implicit in education in general: listening is not usually taught in the classroom and no one is graded on it, even though listening skills affect grades. Because students have been conditioned to believe that listening is presumably something that just happens, it is difficult for the students to change their perception of listening as anything other than a subskill or passive activity, if it is an activity at all. As a result, they downplay the importance of their roles as listeners. In many cases, they are not even aware of the effect their listening behavior may have on the speaker. Rather than explain and explain again why good listening is essential, an undertaking sure to encourage my audience to tune out, I work with an object lesson which usually succeeds in encouraging them to become active listeners. What follows is a description of this lesson and how it works for me.

Lesson Description

At the meeting prior to the date planned for this exercise, the class is assigned to read their textbook's chapter on listening. Nearly every speech book I've seen has one. (If it did not, I would not adopt it.) When the students arrive for the next class, I announce I have an article I found on listening I would like to share with them, and I go on to read it. I try to suppress

my theatrical tendencies in order to provide a delivery void of any compelling expression or vocal emphasis on key words or phrases. I do not aim for a monotone or mechanical delivery; my goal is a clear and fair reading with appropriately-spaced pauses. I can see the students tuning out after a paragraph or two, and practically all are lost by article's end, even though the reading itself takes less than ten minutes. The sighs of relief that follow my reading are interrupted by my request they take out pens and paper and answer a few questions. Moans and groans and protests follow: "You didn't say there was a test on it," "I kind of thought you'd do this," or simply "Oh §^&*." I then ask about ten questions, items chosen beforehand for specific reasons. I compose questions dealing with number facts, small and major details, main ideas, and context interpretations. I make sure the questions represent material from the beginning, middle and end of the article. After the students have exchanged a few nervous glances and begin to feel uncomfortable with their performances, I tell them their grades here will not count. But the quiz creates just enough tension for the students to take what follows seriously.

As we go over the answers, I ask the class to note their errors to see if any patterns emerge. In identifying error type, such as number facts or small details, e.g., we question whether that sort of error is typical for each student and what it might indicate, such as "Do I tune out statistics?" "Do I focus on small details at the expense of the main idea?" "Do I listen

more attentively at the beginning than the middle or end?" This analysis gives the students some idea of where their listening skills may be weak, thus allowing them to develop specific strategies for improvement. Once students have tallied up their scores, I ask how many got them all right and compliment any who did. Then one wrong, two wrong, and so on until every hand has been raised. The majority confess to having only two or three correct answers. At this point I ask gently but sarcastically, "Why did you do so poorly? Weren't you <u>listening</u>?" I pause briefly and ask how they feel about getting only a few answers right on material they just heard. Generally speaking, most seem to be disappointed in themselves. The class accepts the verdict, guilty as charged, and offers explanations.

- I didn't know we were being tested. (Should that matter?)
- I was busy thinking about my parents, my car, my job...
- I have a big test next hour I'm worried about.
- It's Monday.
- I hate to be read to.
- It was boring.
- And a myriad of others.

Although the lesson until now has only taken about one-half the class period, the students seem to expect the exercise to end on this self-recriminating but reasonably-alibied note. It does not.

Usually by this time, someone will have blamed me for not

telling them to take notes or not announcing that a quiz would follow the reading. If this charge is not leveled, providing me a transition to the next phase of the lesson, I ask "Was it all your fault?" This question opens up a discussion of what I as a teacher/speaker did wrong and criticism flows freely. I agree wholeheartedly with their assessment. Then, in a more constructive mode, ideas for what I should have done, were the material really important to me, are suggested. A representative sampling usually includes:

- Providing prefatory explanations of what I'm reading and some idea of its importance.
- Using more expression in my voice.
- Using gestures to highlight points, as in raising one, two or three fingers when counting ideas.
- Using previews and summations.
- Stopping periodically to ask questions, thereby renewing the audience's involvement.
- Writing key ideas on the board.
- Repeating key ideas.
- Expanding on complex ideas.
- Walking around more.
- Supplying the class with copies of the article.

Because the material *is* important to me, I do distribute copies of the article for their later reading. By now, we've usually used about 80% of class time and former *mea culpas* have been

replaced by a feeling of self-satisfaction in the awareness that I, too, not only share in the blame for the poor showing, but may be the cause. Again, the class feels the lesson is over, and again it is not.

Unfortunately, this second attitude is once again speaker-centered. The class has shifted most of the responsiblity for good listening to the speaker. I acknowledge that a well-prepared speaker should adapt material to the audience and try to aid the listener by using some of their delivery suggestions. I tell the class I expect them, as good speakers, always to have listening ease in mind. But then I ask the class how frequently they encounter speakers who put forth this much effort for them. Typically, the responses are "seldom" and "never." I ask how many day-to-day situations come complete with announcements saying "You'd better listen, this is important," or "You'll need this information next week." Realising these red-flag, good-listening alerts are not the rule, I ask what we can do to avoid repeating the sort of poor listening consequences just experienced. Of course I agree immediately with the student who inevitably replies "But we can't be listening 100% all the time to everything." What ensues is a discussion of the types of listening we may engage in, such as critical or social, and what our roles are in these encounters. This material is usually covered, too, in the assigned chapter. We seem in on the suggestion that in each listening situation we should decide what sort of listening is called for and devise an appropriate listening strategy, be it

taking notes, preparing questions, or simply nodding yes or no. The idea I want instilled is that a person becomes a good listener by taking an active role, by constantly asking, "What is my role here as a listener?" In so doing, the listener is taking responsibility for at least 50% of the communication process, making successful communication or shared meaning much more likely to occur.

I receive a lot of positive feedback on this lesson. At each juncture, the nods of agreement seem sincere. As the class leaves, I've overheard comments like "That was good," or "I never thought about listening like that." The feedback feels wonderful and I feel pleased and satisfied in knowing that this lesson has had an impact on some students.

I do not consider the concept of listening to be fully covered with this chapter and lesson. I continue to examine the role of the listener throughout the semester and suggest complementary listening skills whenever a new speaking skill is being taught. For example, we try to identify the differences between informative listening and evaluative listening, between neutral listening or biased listening when we discuss the differences between informative speaking and persuasive speaking. This frequent focus on listening, this effort to move listening to the conscious level, makes me feel a little more confident that, by semester's end should I ask "Weren't you listening?" the "Yes" answers will be louder than the "No's."